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Industrial Disasters or Industry as Disaster?

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Industrial Disasters or Industry as Disaster?

In January 2013, almost three years after the Deepwater Horizon deep-sea oil drill operated by British Petroleum (BP) in the Gulf of Mexico exploded on 20th April 2010, a U.S. court ruled that BP and their drilling partners were responsible for the blowout (in addition to manslaughter of 11 workers who died in the explosion, and for lying to Congress about the size of the spill). As a result of the incident, vast quantities of oil fouled the ocean, beaches, deep-sea coral, wetlands, wildlife refuges and estuaries, in the largest marine spill in the history of the petroleum industry (flowing unabated for five months and probably still seeping now). Blame was placed on the fact that BP and their partners made a series of cost-cutting decisions in a rush to complete the oil-well, as well as poor equipment maintenance and undertrained staff. The giant U.K.-based oil corporation was told to pay $4 billion in criminal penalties – as if such damage could ever be addressed through financial means, or through 'justice' – and is now more active than ever in the Gulf of Mexico, with seven rigs drilling wells. BP has poured vast amounts of money into 're-greening' its image as an ecologically-conscious outfit since the spill, helped for example by its adoption as a London 2012 Olympic 'sustainability partner', and otherwise continues as usual with their pillage and devastation of the Earth.

While executives, journalists and citizens close the book on the atrocity, in the Gulf of Mexico disturbing repercussions of the spill are emerging. Vast numbers of mutated shrimp, crab and fish are turning up on a daily basis which are deformed by chemicals released during the disaster. The toxic dispersants used by BP to break up the spilt oil are known to be mutagenic: shrimp, for example, have a life-cycle short enough that more than three generations have existed since the disaster began, giving the chemicals time to enter the genome.

"I've seen the brown shrimp catch drop by two-thirds, and so far the white shrimp have been wiped out. The shrimp are immune compromised. We are finding shrimp with tumors on their heads, and are seeing this every day. [...] We've fished here all our lives and have never seen anything like this"
- Keath Ladner, Hancock County, Mississippi.

Darla Rooks, from Port Sulfur, Louisiana, reported finding crabs "*with holes in their shells, shells with all the points burned off so all the spikes on their shells and claws are gone, misshapen shells, and crabs that are dying from within …**they are still alive, but you open them up and they smell like they've been dead for a week.***" She's finding shrimp with abnormal growths, female shrimp with their babies still attached to them, eyeless shrimp, and shrimp with oiled gills. "*We are also seeing eyeless fish, and fish lacking even eye-sockets, and fish with lesions [reportedly 20-50% affected is commonplace], fish without covers over their gills, and others with large pink masses hanging off their eyes and gills.*"

Hundreds of dolphin deaths have been reported in the region since BP's disaster began, with causes from drastic anemia to liver and lung cancer. **Dolphins are picking up whatever is in the system out there, the oil is working its way through the food cycle (entering from zooplankton) – and dolphins are affected by everything in that food cycle.** The chemicals then move into their fat; when they're

of sharks appearing off the coast of Russia and tropical birds and fish in the fjords of Norway, as polar ice sheds trillions of tons of water. Global sea-level rise is already swallowing shoreline settlements such as the Kowanyama of Australia, as the cruel result of global capitalism hits some of the peoples least involved in the industrial society first. Raising temperatures results in increasingly devastating super-storms and hurricanes, as wetlands, oyster bays and reefs which were natural barriers disappear.

Perhaps the oceans are one of the final frontiers of wilderness. They are wounded, but not yet truly colonised in the same way as the much of the Earth. It has been commented that science knows more about the Mars than about deep-seas (unfortunately, there are scientists speaking of the "enormous biotechnology benefits" from patenting and developing new uses for genes discovered in the sea, in the obsessive quest to obtain a complete inventory of marine species). Due to this proven difficulty to domesticate, sea has been relegated to civilisation's less-valued domains, projected as a vast soulless expanse to take fuel and fish from and into which to pour waste and pollutants too toxic to be acceptable by the public on land (such as nuclear fallout from Japan's most recent 'accident' and radioactive materials more generally). More insane experiments are underway; 'carbon sequestration' dumping large amounts of CO_2 into the sea, or the 'geo-engineering' test gone haywire that dumped 100 tonnes of iron sulphate in the North Pacific to 'lock carbon' – causing an artificial toxic algae bloom 10,000 square kilometres across.

But although the dominant culture can view the open waters as alien or even hostile, there remains in many human legacies – still aware of the deep interconnectedness of all life – a deep respect for what was considered by the author John Ruskin "the best emblem of unwearied unconquerable power, the wild, various, fantastic, tameless unity of the sea."

or espionage, but we cannot discount the possibility that he was the willful target of conscious liberatory violence. And, of course, many people are also working to create (and re-discover) non-oil-dependent ways of living out of synch with the global mega-machine while fighting to destroy it...

Beside these acts lies combat with the totality of civilisation: the commercial centres, the research laboratories, the military infrastructure, the lords and priests, the police and prisons, the alienation and disempowerment, the morals and disciplines. Struggle against the pollution of our planet cannot stay stunted at the level of defensive action on a sinking ship, but rather must be a step towards the destruction of industrial society, and of the domination and domestication of all life more generally.

The Deepwater Horizon atrocity is, as if we needed one, another reason to arm against the world order of our age, along with the total degradation of the seas on Earth. Under industrialism's iron fist, the previously-teeming oceans are now subject to plummeting fish numbers as they are poisoned or brutally harvested, the slow but sure death of entire coral reefs, floating swarms of plastic domestic trash hundreds of miles across, the acidification and pollution of the water. Of the 70% of the planet's surface which is covered by the waves, there are growing zones where even the plankton population is undergoing a historic crash. Considering research that suggests two out of three animal breaths are made possible by the oxygen plankton produce, how far behind will we be if the system continues unabated (or, given that we are seeing the environmental effects now of civilisation's activities decades in the past, even if it were to fall tomorrow)?

A vast imbalance has been inflicted on the ocean systems by global warming caused by industrial processes, to the effect

pregnant, their young rely on this fat, and so dolphins are having developmental issues and still births.

This murderous damage is irreversible: due to the greed of the drilling corporations and the petro-chemical addiction of modern society which justifies it, the Gulf of Mexico is scarred by 'industrial disaster'. **But, in fact, industry is *inseparable* from its disasters, it *is* disaster**. In whatever sector you might choose to study, a way of life based on 'resource extraction' (read; elimination of living habitat, contamination of entire bio-regions), mechanised process (the tyranny of efficiency, complex technological and scientific progression to surpass human-scale knowledge and autonomy, strict compartmentalisation of tasks and expertise) and class-stratified labour (wage-slavery, specialisation, submission to the social machine) is a catastrophe for biodiversity in particular, our own capacity for free lives, and wildness in general.

As a case in hand, let's consider the fate of the global marine environments at the hands of petro-chemical extraction, transportation and consumption.

Firstly, the kind of catastrophes such as BP's Gulf of Mexico 'spill' (such a passive and responsibility-free term...) are never cleaned up. The problem just gets moved around. When specialists speak of 'recovery' it is a bland mockery of the previously diverse ecology destroyed by whatever incident: the oil/toxic waste/sewage must go *somewhere*. They equate the relative post-disaster biological stability with 'recovery' when the contaminants have been dispersed and diluted, with the ocean accumulating more and more poison. In the Gulf of Mexico there is still more than 200 million gallons of oil in the water from BP's incident.

The technological solutions purported to 'deal' with the catastrophes are, like so many of civilisation's false rem-

edies for its own damage, the arrival of more problems. In a devastating experiment during the Gulf of Mexico release of oil, BP deployed at least 1.9 million gallons of Corexit dispersants, including genetically-modified/bio-engineered microbes alleged to 'eat' the oil – except these properties were found to be grossly overstated. The bacteria did, however, make an even more toxic substance when mixed with crude oil, reduce oxygen levels in the water as well as mutating its occupants, and as they spread in the air and come down in the rain they're suspected to be responsible for an outbreak of mysterious skin rashes onshore in the region. Clean-up workers were sprayed directly with Corexit (known to damage the respiratory and central nervous systems, deform embryos or fetuses and be carcinogenic), and threatened with firing when they asked for respirators to work in as it would "look bad in media coverage". For the corporations involved, what transpired was a *public relations disaster*, not a technological or environmental one.

And the stark fact is that these enormous 'spills' are hardly rare. BP's Gulf of Mexico release was massive (20 times greater than even the notorious 1989 incident in Alaska where Exxon's Valdez ship spewed 11 million gallons of oil into a bay containing one of the richest concentrations of wild animals in North America), and the damage cannot be understated. But apparently fires and explosions happen on Gulf of Mexico platforms scores of times every year, in the same way that before the Valdez incident up to 600 smaller local spills per year were reported (never mind those which weren't). After Valdez, another spill off the west coast of Wales in 1996 was around twice the size, but garnered little media attention in comparison. Within two months of BP's spill, a TransAlaska pipeline let loose 1,000 barrels of crude oil, and the same day a merchant ship in the Singapore Straight collided with an oil tanker, spewing 25,000 tonnes of crude. In December 2012, a ship ran aground (there was no-one at the wheel – auto-pilot technology presumably failed) in Papua New Guinea, threatening spectacularly diverse

through wilderness, hazardous and exploitative work in construction, ongoing war to control strategic regions, and ongoing pollution as refineries, mines and factories churn out their produce as the traffic roars on.

It is too early to tell whether the alternatives to petroleum will carry industrial civilisation past the fossil fuel 'crisis', or if the monster will stumble and fragment into something else entirely (with exploitation, dominance and control of the wild doubtless still on the agendas of the powerful). We have no wish to just wait to see: even if the global events are beyond our scope, **we prefer the dignity of violent revolt against the machine and its technicians, to reject their despotic manipulations and toxic production.**

There are endless possibilities within the hellish cities, industrial zones and remote facilities to target the responsible drilling corporations, car production and distribution, fuel depots, the bosses offices and company vehicles, the politicians who are hand-in-hand with Capital, and the media who spread the supposed 'benefits' of industrial development and who are complicit in covering-up or minimising the atrocities. We can take example and inspiration from tribespeople forcing pipeline surveyors from indigenous habitat and downing electricity pylons, from the anarchist urban warfare cells carrying out night-time bombings and window-smashing of energy firms and the banks funding industrial endeavours, from confrontational roadblocking by 'Luddites Against the Domestication of Wild Nature' disrupting traffic in Mexico, from combative wildcat strikes of rig workers in Kazakhstan, guerrilla struggle in Nigeria against oil extraction, Earth Liberation Front sabotage of petrol stations in Rome or motorway construction in Russia and Ukraine... Also, October 2012, a high-ranking Exxon-Mobil oil executive was shot dead as he left a restaurant in Brussels. There have been many speculations about his death, from a bungled robbery or gangland execution to business vendettas

earthquakes, and the enormous 'Tar Sands' project in Alberta, Canada (involving, of course, BP).

Considering that the current manifestation of global capitalism is hopelessly dependent on fossil fuels for everything from medicine to communications to agriculture, the unthinkable - an end to infinite economic expansion powered by those fuels - is intruding on the dreams of the rich and powerful. Like all empires as they reach their end, petro-chemical society flounders into a destructive and desperate downward-spiral. We have no way of knowing what is true from the whirlwind of claims surrounding 'peak oil', alternative energy sources, and nanotechnological sorcery that, it is claimed, may make fuel from currently-unusable materials (low-grade crude oil) and turn wood chips or even grass into ethanol for bio-fuel. **What we *do* know is that their solutions are as murderous as their problems**, evidenced by: land dispossession, starvation and rioting in the Global South as grain prices shoot up due to bio-fuel production for the North (pollutants from which in turn are expected to kill at least 1,400 people a year in Europe by 2020); orangutans facing extinction as forests are cleared for palm oil plantations; turbines stretching into the distance as wind farms replace live habitat; flooding from hydro-electric dams annihilating cultures and ecology on every continent. **What we *do* know is that the scientific and industrial narrative of today has no concept of thresholds**, so instead of confronting the inevitable (non-availability of the current means to implement and administer their ecocidal regime) there exists a society-wide practice of denial.

Everyday resource harvesting is a disaster, social and ecological (in fact it is only within civilisation that the two are considered distinct): however you dress up a bright new future of wind-/solar-/hydro-power, the framework would still guarantee centralised coordination (i.e centralised power of specialists and technocrats), transport and distribution infrastructure cutting

marine life, coral reefs and mangrove forests, and coating 115 metres of coastline. BP themselves are no strangers to catastrophe: recently attested by a refinery explosion in Texas City in 2005, then an Alaskan pipeline leak in 2006. On and on. With the global petro-chemical addiction, oil and toxic waste spills accompany industry every step of the way.

The lie we are sold by the media, State and industry is that any of these calamities (the symptoms) can be resolved in isolation from the fact that industrial civilisation (the disease) is based on the degradation of the living Earth. In many ways the dominant culture's portrayal of larger disasters (or even the global, insidious ecological threats that hover over the rest of modern society that hasn't – yet – faced the oil spill, chronically-contaminated air, climate chaos, desertification, etc...) can become a paralysing force. This happens when we are confronted by images of such horror within an authoritarian discourse which offers no alternative to complete dependence on science and industrial technology to 'solve' its own problems.

But the most important thing to grasp is that the real disaster, the real atrocity, the real devastation *is the continuation of everyday life within industrial civilisation*. To think of these mediatized events as aberrant from the overall mode of operation in this society only mystifies what is constant, undramatic and murderous about the latter. It's true that the death of 20% of the juvenile bluefin tuna in the Gulf's most important spawning area and season due to BP's spill (the fish take five to 15 years to mature) exposes the callous disregard industry has for the victims-in-waiting of their inevitable disasters. But the tuna's spawning stock had already declined 82% in the Western Atlantic during the previous 30 years. (Bluefin tuna are one of the world's largest and fastest fish; as well as the most endangered of all tuna species, which has led people to action in defence of them. For just one example, in July 2011 an Animal Liberation

Front diver group sabotaged a fishery in St Pauls Bay off Malta, cutting open the cage-nets and causing €95,000 damage). For these tuna, and much more, *no 'spill' would still have meant disaster.*

As for the spilt oil; most of the hundreds of millions of barrels-worth which float on the world's waters at any given time is not from accidents but from ship bilges or engines being cleaned, industrial and municipal run-off, and other perfectly routine activity. **Business-as-usual means a constant oil slick even before anything 'goes wrong'.**

The next untapped deep-sea frontier expansion the oil industry (including BP) has its eyes on is the fragile and pristine Arctic. Somewhat ironically, drilling in the farthest north has been eased by global warming as the Arctic is heating up faster than anywhere else on the planet, and as much as 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves lie beneath the rapidly melting northern ice cover. In the treacherous waters of the Arctic, the response to any oil release would be hugely complicated by extreme cold, strong winds, breakaway ice blocks and, in the winter, limited daylight. If a blowout occurs and wasn't capped or a relief well drilled before winter, the blowout will operate right through the winter months, with oil and gas coming up under the ice, absorbed into the floe and carried away downstream with it when the ice moves. By spring the oil would cover a huge area. As always, the industry will no doubt assure us of the near-impossibility of anything 'going wrong' in the first place, which should be familiar by now: before the Deepwater Horizon explosion, similar assurances were given for deep-sea drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.

The global race is on to secure the diminishing oil fields for exploitation by the world powers – nation-states and industry. The most destructive methods are being employed even for lower-quality fuel: for example 'fracking' to extract shale gas, with dire consequences such as chronic groundwater pollution and